Herring and Rangwala, political scientists at the universities of Bristol and Cambridge respectively, argue that the U.S. enterprise to democratize Iraq failed less because of the weakness of the Iraqi state and the strength of its sectarian divisions but rather because U.S. policymakers tried too hard to control the parameters and outcome of democratization. It is the occupation, they insist, that is responsible for Iraq's fragmentation.

While Herring and Rangwala have long been opponents of U.S. policy in Iraq, their study is no polemic. They examine the post-liberation fragmentation of Iraqi political authority. Their argument that the Coalition Provisional Authority "hollowed out" the national political process in order to retain predominance is correct, as is their demonstration of how insurgents exploit vulnerabilities in reconstruction to derail it. Their discussion of the failures of the Iraqi economy is provocative. Less convincing but still relevant is their description of the dysfunctional impact of large U.S. reconstruction contractors upon it. They conclude by arguing that so long as occupation continues denying Iraq a single, clear source of political authority, fragmentation will continue. They further contend that no number of technocratic fixes will allow Iraqis to overcome the problems caused by occupation.

Iraq in Fragments is a flawed work, though. Like too many political scientists, Herring and Rangwala treat the subject of their study as a petri dish, carefully manipulating variables in order to achieve the desired result. They sometimes shape evidence to fit their thesis. Their declaration that de-Baathification sacked "all senior public sector officials who had been Baath Party members (regardless of their status within the party)" is incorrect: De-Baathification affected only the top 20,000 party members, approximately 1 percent of the total membership. The authors also undercut their work by relying upon unreliable sources. They suggest that the U.S. decision to crack down on firebrand Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was motivated by Israel's targeted killing of Hamas spiritual leader Ahmad Yasin. Their source? University of Michigan professor and polemicist Juan Cole. He has credentials concerning nineteenth-century history, but Cole has neither...
experience in Iraq nor practical or research experience in U.S. policymaking. His writings on current topics rely more on polemic and conspiracy theory than fact.

Likewise, Herring and Rangwala's criticism of heavy-handed U.S. counterinsurgency also falls short. They are correct that too much recourse to military engagement backfires. Insurgents seek to draw disproportionate responses because collateral damage can be a good recruiting tool. The soft British approach in southern Iraq was less successful, though. By refusing to engage, the British army simply enabled Iranian-backed militias to take root and flourish.

The greatest flaw in *Iraq in Fragments*, though, is the authors' failure to address other reasons for Iraq's fragmentation. Like the proverbial blind men describing an elephant, too narrow a perspective leads to incomplete, if not inaccurate, conclusions. The authors are too quick to dismiss Iraq's existing weaknesses as a cause of fragmentation. Had the Kurds not been in a near constant state of civil war with Baghdad since 1961? Had the 1991 uprising in fourteen out of eighteen governorates not shown internal weakness? Also missing is consideration of to what extent other external actors—Iranians, Syrians, Turks, and Jordanians—have contributed to Iraq's fragmentation. Such artificially narrow perspective leaves unproved their thesis. Nevertheless, for thoughtful criticism, *Iraq in Fragments* is far superior to other books written by critics of U.S. policy.

Related Topics:  *Iraq* | *Michael Rubin* | *Spring 2008 MEQ*

---

**SUBSCRIBE TO THE MEF MAILING LIST**

Type your email here...  Submit

**LATEST ARTICLES**

*Netanyahu's Best of All Possible Worlds Victory*
by Micah Levinson

*Sudan Crisis Impacts Whole Middle East*
by Seth Frantzman

*Did the Maryland Terrorism Suspect Have Ongoing Ties with Jihadists in His Native Trinidad?*
by Todd Bensman

*Russia and Turkey Are Now Deeply Entwined on Trade and Defense*
by Seth Frantzman

*Israelis Need Better Understanding of American Jews*
by Asaf Romirowsky

---

This text may be reposted or forwarded so long as it is presented as an integral whole with complete and accurate information provided about its author, date, place of publication, and original URL.
The Iraqi population started out by being patient with the occupation and then they saw that things were not working. For example, electricity was only on 50 percent of the time one year after the occupation. After the 1991 war, it took Saddam one or two months to get the electricity working, as everyone pointed out to me.

JL: This summer I'm working on editing the fourth chapter [of Iraq in Fragments], making a short film from some of the remaining footage shot in Iraq. Then we'll see.